

Former Justice James Robertson donates portrait to Supreme Court

October 13, 2015

Former Mississippi Supreme Court Justice James L. Robertson of Jackson gathered with current justices and some of his former colleagues Thursday, Oct. 8, to unveil his portrait and reminisce.

“We are honored that you would make this bequest,” Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr. told Justice Robertson and his wife, Administrative Judge, author and artist Linda Thompson.

Oxford artist Deborah Freeland drew the profile portrait in graphite in 1984, a year after Robertson joined the court.

The portrait was hung Thursday outside the entrance to the State Law Library. It was added to the Supreme Court’s historic collection, which includes more than 40 portraits of justices who served from the 1800s to modern times.

Former Chief Justice Edwin Lloyd Pittman, who served with Robertson, said he was a scholarly, prolific writer in his court opinions as well as law journal articles. “Robertson is a brilliant lawyer and a brilliant mind. I did give him advice on street sense on occasion,” Pittman said.

Robertson ushered in modern legal research for the court. When he arrived at the court, “there was nothing but law books here. I had been using Lexis for three years. I couldn’t imagine having to function without it....How could you possibly operate the court without that kind of resource?” he recalled. He arranged for the Law Library to have a Lexis terminal installed, with three months of free use, after which the court could subscribe to the service or give it up. “I couldn’t get anyone to go near it.”

On the last day of the free trial, Chief Justice Neville Patterson needed to locate an opinion in a case he had authored in years past. He remembered only the defendant’s nickname. It took Robertson about 30 seconds to find the case using Lexis. Patterson was amazed and said, “We’ve got to have this,” Robertson recalled. Afterwards, the running complaint was the amount of fees the court spent monthly for Robertson’s legal research – until Justice Fred Banks came to the court and used the service twice as much.

The scholarly Justice Banks laughed.

There were no computers. The fastest typewriter was an IBM Selectric, and a typist had to retype the whole page if a mistake was made. The old Gartin Justice Building’s decor, including ugly yellow naugahyde chairs, was once described by a court administrator as “early fish camp.”



The justices with whom Robertson served were larger-than-life characters: former Chief Justices Patterson, Roy Noble Lee, Armis Hawkins, Harry Walker, Dan Lee, Lenore Prather and Pittman, and Presiding Justices Michael Sullivan and Chuck McRae. Robertson cherished memories of serving with Justices Reuben Anderson and Joseph Zuccaro.

Recalling Sullivan's biting wit often delivered in a stage whisper, Robertson said people have asked what it was like to work with him. "Imagine working with Don Rickles every day."

McRae said, "There were some great times."

Pittman said later, "Sometimes Chuck made it more exciting that I wanted it to be."

Robertson added, "All of my Roy Noble Lee stories are in an in memoriam piece I authored for the Capital Area Bar Association Newsletter last spring." "Remembering Judge Roy Noble Lee" appears on pages 4-7 at www.caba.ms/newsletters/caba-april-2015.pdf. Previously, Robertson published a tribute to Neville Patterson, the first Chief Justice under whom he served. "Neville Patterson: A Remembrance," is published in 57 *Miss. L. Journ.* 417 (August 1987).

Robertson was a member of the faculty of the University of Mississippi School of Law from 1977 through 1992. He taught full-time 1979 until his appointment to the Supreme Court. He continued to teach a legal philosophy course while serving on the court.

Gov. William Winter appointed Robertson to a vacancy on the court on Jan. 17, 1983. Robertson served on the court for more than nine years. He was defeated in his second election campaign. He resigned Sept. 1, 1992, and taught the fall semester of 1992 as a visiting professor of law at Fordham Law School in Manhattan.

He has been a shareholder in the Jackson law firm of Wise, Carter, Child & Caraway, P.A., since 1993. He is currently listed in *Best Lawyers in American* in the specialties of admiralty and maritime, civil rights, commercial litigation, antitrust, environmental, intellectual property and First Amendment law.

Justice Robertson, 75, was born in Greenwood and grew up in Greenville. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Mississippi in 1962 and a law degree from Harvard University in 1965.

His 50-year reunion at Harvard is coming up soon. When he learned that about 100 of his classmates have died, he started working on a "bucket list." The portrait presentation was on the list.

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